

Discourse and Dis-course: Revisiting Black Identity through Milkman's Quest in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon.

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ABSTRACT: *The quest for identity has been of concern to Black people in America since slavery. Oppressed and gagged, their history has always been distorted. That distortion denied Blacks' identity and dignity. The fight they undertook had as goal to reject misconceptions and destroy stereotyped images ascribed to them. The restoring of their history in its veracity shows that Blacks have a valuable culture enabling them to analyze and understand social events that happen in their new living environment. Blacks' culture gives a real meaning to their existence and endows them with an identity that brings them dignity and pride allowing them to express American citizenship and assert themselves.*

Keywords: *Quest, identity, history, culture, self-assertion, dignity, pride.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The United States of America was built on the belief that all men are created equal. Unfortunately, for long, Blacks who were taken from their continent and enslaved in this country experienced discrimination and had to fight to acquire some dignity. Later, black writers used literature as a "weapon" in their fight. Through their works, these writers tried to restore Blacks' true identity. Toni Morrison was among these writers with her novel *Song of Solomon* which dramatizes Milkman Dead, a young Blackman's quest for identity. This quest, in fact, aims to restore the whole history of Blacks in the United States through their cultural heritage such as (re)naming and family unity. Thus, endowed with courage and heroism, Milkman undertakes to discard false identities to reach self-assertion and redefine himself.

In this paper, we intend to analyze the protagonist's quest from a deconstructionist perspective. We will therefore show that through slavery, myths were created by Whites to taint Blacks' image while promoting misconceptions about them. Morrison's characters live under false pretenses, creating for themselves identities which belittle them. Milkman's quest, then, reveals as an undertaking to destabilize these images in order to correct them and make them accepted in American mainstream culture.

II. THE RESTORATION OF BLACKS' HISTORY

The process of enslavement was particularly painful for Blacks. Cut from their native land, they were frightened by the artifacts of the White man's civilization and terrified by his cruelty until they learned that they were only expected to work for him. From then on, their history has been distorted, falsified to show that they have no real history and past. Like most Black writers who castigated the dehumanization of Blacks, Toni Morrison shows that they have a real and valuable history which could be seen through their culture. Blacks' history was based on their culture which determined the norms of conducts, defined roles and behavioral patterns. This culture also provided a network of individual showing values that modeled their personality by giving them dignity and restoring their identity.

A- The Importance of Culture for Blacks' Identity

Black writers find it is their responsibility to recover the annihilated history of their race. Toni Morrison does not remain aloof from this trend through her use of mythic characters. Her novels deal with the exploration of the history of slavery in America. They show the reality of Blacks' oppression by Whites and the myth which describes the early history of Blacks. The myth in *Song of Solomon* highlights a special power of African people who returned to Africa to escape the difficult living and working conditions of slavery. The flight is used in the narrative as a means of reconnection with one's roots. Solomon, milkman's grandfather tried to take away his son, Jake, but failed to protect him. Milkman's quest traces the origin of the flying Africans to his great grandfather, Solomon. Through this myth, Milkman discovers the identity of Solomon and understands that the flight is a proof of an intrinsic value to achieve selfhood. The fragments of the past become the coherent family story through which Milkman discovers his identity.

In addition to the myth of the flight, Morrison also uses songs as another cultural trait which contributes to the recovery of Milkman's identity. The importance of songs in *Song of Solomon* is a key link to ancestors, to history. The solution to Milkman's quest is found in the words and the rhythms of a song his aunt Pilate sings at his birth: « Oh sugarman done fly away, sugarman done gone, sugarman cut across the sky, sugarman gone home».(5)

This song becomes the key to Milkman's quest and illustrates the function of Blacks in passing on stories to future generations. Songs have a significant role in Blacks' culture, hence their relevance in *Song of Solomon*. Milkman's history is not a recorded one; it is rather remembered and recollected by different people. When he grows up, Milkman hears children singing a song in Shallimar, Virginia: « Jake the only son of Solomon Come booby yale, come booby tambee, Whirled about and touched the sun, Come booba yale, come booba tambee». (306)

As he deciphers the song, Milkman finds in it the narrative of his family. Like the myth of the flight, songs can also maintain the links between ideas and stories passed from generations to generations. Throughout *Song of Solomon*, singing is used to recall and resurrect the past and to bring people closer. Milkman's relationship to his aunt Pilate, favored by the song of Solomon, reveals as a major step towards finding his past and his identity.

The song enabling Morrison's Black characters to find their identity is also illustrated in *The Bluest Eye*, (1970). Cholly celebrates his new identity through a song. He appears as an orphan as his mother gives him up on a household refuse. His aunt Jimmy who takes care of him dies and he is rejected by his father. He loses his self-control and retires in the forest. He is consoled by the song of a carter: "fresh from the vine, sweet as sugar, red as wine". (123).

The carter's song has a link with Cholly's life. The wine is compared to Cholly who has just been rejected by his father. The sweetness of the sugar refers to his feeling of relief. While he might believe that he is free, the red wine warns him of the danger attached to his freedom. The red color symbolizes the problems he must face. The carter's song indicates Cholly's new life in which he must confront hard realities. On the whole, this song alludes to Cholly's past, present and future life. Without this song, his freedom and identity become meaningless.

Morrison addresses history as the central theme and she mostly reconnects her Black characters with their African roots. The pivotal issue of her writing lies in the point

where Blacks are the victims of Whites as a result of slavery. Black people feel closer to

Africa that they consider as the cradle of their culture. Their strength lies in a culture that is different from that of Whites and their self-identity can be achieved only after they connect themselves with their forefathers, their past. The connection of Blacks with their history is also perceived through renaming.

B- Renaming as a New Sense of Identity

When Blacks were taken from Africa to the New Land, their African names were removed along with their original culture. They got rid of their slave names to have new names and get a more prideful cultural identity. Even if those new names were rarely Africans, their purpose was to show their status as free people.

In *Song of Solomon*, names show the effects of both oppression and liberation. Before Milkman uncovers his grandfather's true name, (Jake), he was known as Macon Dead, a name the White oppressors gave him. When he finds out his grandfather's true name, he feels proud of himself and of his family. The process of naming Black people is also rooted in their history. Through Milkman's quest, we learn that the name of the first Macon Dead was Jake. Milkman is a nickname which indicates his long breastfeeding period and therefore associated with shame. Generally speaking, nicknames provide an opportunity for a community to acknowledge distinctions in a personality and to recognize the individual experience as meaningful. Whether good or bad, it permits a community to identify the experiences or characteristics that define the individual. In *Song of Solomon*, among the most important renaming is that of Macon Dead III, better known as Milkman. Instead of bringing him dignity and pride, this name identifies both his inability to achieve manhood and the impossibility of his community to see him as a fully-grown man.

Through the knowledge of names that have got before, Milkman can understand and accept his own name, and at last feels true love for himself and his people. A central issue of this quest is the search for the meaning of names, because the power to name is the only and real power one can achieve in the Black community. As a member of this community, Milkman is faced with the deliberate refusal of his people to accept names arbitrarily bestowed upon them. Reacting against this oppression from White people, Blacks rename reality and give themselves meaningful names: Railroad Tommy and Hospital Tommy are named after their respective career. Guitar Bains is named after his love for this musical instrument. Each member of the Dead family is given a name chosen from the Bible at random: Pilate, Hagar, First Corinthians and Magdalene are chosen following this practice.

Various aspects of renaming are shown in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1971)*. That novel deals also with renaming to bear out Black freedom. Soon after the freedom bell rang, a little band decided to leave for North for more freedom. After a long walk, they stopped to have a rest. Then, they began changing their names. Some renamed themselves after great figures in American history. One of the characters called Ned, became Ned Douglas, after Frederick Douglass who was the first spokesman of Black people. Tacey, the main character changed her name to Jane. This process of renaming is completed as a ritual like baptism,

circumcision or puberty by which young persons enter into the world of their group because their social status has changed.

Through name-changing, Black people wanted to mitigate or conceal an inferior status, abandoning names acquired from slavery. In so doing, they wanted to assert their independence and reassert their cultural identity, one made up of what a person is born with. This identity is different from all other multiple and secondary ones people acquire because unlike all others.

In the process of finding their lost identity, Black people also lay stress on the notion of family. Having no family means for them having no past and no history, since each family has its own past and history. An individual acquires his identity from his family. Family life is then of great importance for Blacks. This is why in his quest for identity, Milkman decides to reunify his dislocated family.

C- Family Reconciliation

In *Song of Solomon*, the Dead family is most known through its division. Macon Dead II leads one part and the other one is led by Pilate Dead. Macon does no longer get on with his sister Pilate because he thinks she has stolen the gold belonging to an old White man they killed in a cave. After the death of their father, they run across the forest and found in a cave, a White man they killed. At the same time, they heard dogs barking from a distance. Frightened, they fled away. Later, Macon came back to the cave hoping to see the gold. But he found neither Pilate nor the gold. He concluded that Pilate has taken the gold. For this reason, he separated from his sister. Through his quest for gold and identity, Milkman constitutes a hyphen between his father and Pilate. First, Macon sends him to go and fetch a bag in Pilate's house. For Macon, this bag contains the gold he thinks Pilate has stolen from the White man in the cave. Milkman goes to Pilate's house with his friend Guitar who introduces him to his aunt since they do not know each other. Pilate was very happy to see her nephew. From this meeting, both Pilate and Milkman built strong human relations by which Pilate transmits him teachings necessary for his socialization. Milkman discovers that Pilate puts a particular stress on human values. She loves people passionately, a virtue Macon Dead is incapable of. Seeing Pilate's kindness, Milkman does not understand why his father considers her as a bad woman and compares her to a snake, and prevents him from going to her house. Milkman becomes an intersection point between his father and Pilate. Both communicate indirectly through him. Macon explains Milkman the causes of their separation while Pilate provides him with a strong sense of identity. Macon is astonished by Pilate's humanism when he notices the peaceful atmosphere that prevails in her house, while the atmosphere in his own house is unbearable. Pilate's house accommodates three generations: Pilate, her daughter Reba and her granddaughter Hagar. The harmony in Pilate's house has favored Milkman's integration in the Dead family. Pilate is Milkman's spiritual guide. With her help, Milkman undertakes his quest for identity that leads him from North to South. He comes back to the North and tells his aunt and his father the results of his discovery: the history of his family. At last, Macon and Pilate agree to return to the cave in Pennsylvania so that they could properly bury their father who was left on the bank of a river.

Through the decision of Macon and Pilate to bury the remains of their father, Milkman recovers both his dislocated family and his identity by recognizing himself and his connection to his family and the whole Black race. He gets relieved from the pain of being nameless and ignored by the White hegemonic society.

Family unity described in *Song of Solomon* is also portrayed in *The Bluest Eye*. In that novel, to favor family unity and a specific identity, Macteer gives his daughters (Frieda and Claudia) an education based on several values. First, he educates them on unconditional love which is essential to reinforce family ties. Second, he teaches them to live on reciprocity. This form of education helps them to know that they depend on each other. Consequently, they need to stand together and rescue each other. Third, Macteer gives them an education based on restriction which brings his daughters to have self-control by recognizing that their rights are subordinated to those of their family. This is why the elder sister, Frieda advises her junior sister, Claudia, not to break family and social norms. Macteer's family appears as a unified, protective and friendly family where the members express pride and dignity.

Restoring the history of Black people in its veracity appears as a necessity for Black writers in so far as it gives them dignity, identity and social importance. Generally, history enables people to be conversant with events that have happened in their life. It also tells about their evolution, their fight and their behavior. Knowing past events is decisive for Black people because it permits them to understand passed facts so as to avoid mistakes and face the future with success. Blacks question the very nature of the American society: its long-standing values, beliefs and institutions. They want to be treated fairly. But to achieve these goals, Blacks had first to redefine themselves. Their basic need was to claim their history and their identity from what must be called cultural terrorism, the degradation of self-justifying white guilt. They had to struggle for the right to create conditions through which they could define themselves and their relationship with their society.

III. MILKMAN'S SELF-ASSERTION

After restoring the history and the identity of his family, Milkman provides a way whereby he can be identified. He thinks he has now an opportunity to act and do things in order to participate in the realization of American history. To do so, he has to respond in a way that fits his temperaments. He can achieve these goals only through his maturity.

A- Milkman's Maturity

Maturity is the state of being mature, which means that a person is fully responsible of his actions. In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman Dead appears as a mature person since he does not escape the various challenges on his way to discover his family history and identity and accepts it as the reality.

The first circumstance that testifies to Milkman's maturity is "baptism". While in Danville, he heads for the cave where the gold he was initially looking for was supposed to be. The difficult walk in the forest forces him to remove his clothes, physical representation of his city life. This riddance of his city identity represents his rejection of his alienated and detached past. As he crosses the river, now deprived of the fine thin socks and shoes, he slips and is immersed by the waters of the river. This conjures baptismal imagery, and suggests that Milkman is being baptized by the land. Just as the Christian rite of baptism symbolizes an embracement in the folds of religion, Milkman's "baptism" by the land is an embracement by the arms of his ancestral past.

Milkman's total immersion and connection with the past now allows him to discover his identity. After Danville, Milkman now visits Shallimar where he uses the skills acquired in the forest of Danville to read the landscape and feel connected to it. This connection to the lands and the past provides a vital link he needs to recognize his identity. In Shallimar, before he can fully embrace the past and be accepted by the people, he must complete a process of cleansing. Through a fight with one of the men, he demonstrates his grit and worth. As a result, the local men invite him to a ritualized hunt at night.

The imaginary baptism, the fight and the hunt contribute to reinforce the hero's maturity. There is a clear shift in his values. He no longer looks for gold but sees the importance of family ties. With pride, he searches for family history. His new knowledge of people around him precipitates his initiation to the tradition and mores of African people. He shows a real transformation in his personality when he accepts the responsibility of adulthood which gives a meaning to his freedom. Milkman in fact, achieves personal freedom through attainment of knowledge by confronting his family and by overcoming the prejudices of society.

After undergoing ordeals which forged his maturity in his quest for identity, Milkman also wants to assert himself. The desire to know himself dominates his actions in the novel, and it is through his actions that we can have a link between space and his identity. Morrison explores this connection by describing the journey of her protagonist to his ancestral home in the South. It is only by undertaking this travel that he can find his past and identity, and genuinely redefine himself.

B- The Importance of Space in Milkman's Quest

The importance of space in constructing identity and self-assertion is well perceived in the opening line of *Song of Solomon*. Milkman is born at "No Mercy Hospital", which is reserved only to Whites. His mother is the daughter of the Negro doctor, Foster. Milkman's birth in that hospital is a symbol. First, it puts an end to White racism in that place, in so far as during his entire professional life, doctor Foster had never been granted hospital privileges and only two of his patients, both Whites were admitted to there. Second, it indicates that Milkman's self-assertion begins at his birth. "No Mercy Hospital" is no longer for Whites only, but also for Blacks. By choosing that hospital as Milkman's birthplace, Morrison gives her protagonist the opportunity to build his own identity. This suggests a fight against a hostile world, a urban anonymity and by making space more intimate. The connection between past, identity and space at the beginning of the novel and the introduction of the main character can be seen as follows: the past is integral in defining one's identity and to access this past, one must have knowledge of the space. With these two concepts, the importance of space as a means to discover the past and, in turn, one's identity can be fully understood.

The impact of space on identity is more demonstrated by the characters' place of living. The Dead's house, located on "Not Doctor Street", was bought by Doctor Forster, the first Black doctor in the town. The Southside of the town known as "Blood Bank" is inhabited only by Blacks. This area gets its name to the violence Whites commit over them. "Blood Bank" suggests an area being the heart of the Black community which is far from White suburbs. There, the Black citizens feel at home. Milkman manages to enjoy himself at "Blood Bank" foreshadowing his future personality change.

Space having effects on the characters' identity is also exemplified in *The Fire Next Time (1963)*. In that novel, the space in which the Black community lives is called "Down Town", which is synonym of violence, squalor and disorder. Children in "Down Town" know that they must grow and die there, since they are not allowed to reach "Up Town", the White living area, which is peaceful. This situation acts on Black

children and forges their mentality, since it gets them ready for fighting in order to improve their living conditions.

In order to free himself from his father's domination and the suffocating imposed environment, Milkman decides to leave, encouraged by his family's stories about gold in a cave. He plans to acquire this wealth for himself. He journeys South, reversing the historical pattern of Black migration. This reversal indicates the spatial symbolism of the South as the past, and announces his discovery of the true gold, his real identity and self. Milkman's journey becomes a reconnection with his past, a re-forging of old family ties, and more importantly by the connection between space and past and a true understanding of self.

After covering the space, the South, his ancestral home, Milkman wants to assert himself economically. Having a financial autonomy is for Blacks one of the best ways to be equal to Whites and to refuse domination. This is why wealth appears as an ultimate objective for Milkman.

C- The Importance of Wealth in Milkman's Quest

In the novel, the relationships between Whites and Blacks constitute a major theme. Poverty is another big issue and many of the characters to overcome it. Instead, money is a means by which some characters like Milkman and his father, Macon Dead II want to challenge the White power. Macon Dead II seeks wealth, prosperity and likeness while remaining undisturbed by the problems inherent to his own community. He stands as the middle-class Blackman, whose concern is to acquire more properties and become respected in the white dominated society. Believing in material possession, he tells his son: "Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you will own yourself and other people too". (55) Macon Dead believes that ownership is the only means to protect him in the white world.

Milkman tries to emulate this characteristic of his father. His father informs him of a green bag full of gold in Pilate's house. He and his best friend Guitar go to Pilate's house to steal it, so that he and his father can become rich.

Milkman's initial quest was for gold. He is encouraged by Guitar who is a victim of white racism and nastiness. His father was sliced in a sawmill. To console his mother and his brothers, the White owner gave them candy. Frustrated, he decides to join the Seven Days, a secret organization which uses violence as a way to take revenge against Whites. Like Milkman, Guitar has also the ambition to become wealthy. For both of them, like most Blacks, having a financial power will enable them to be independent and more responsible. Doing things without being told to is so essential to Blacks that they fight to have an affluent society. For them, it is because they are poor that they are dominated and neglected by Whites. In acquiring wealth, they will have a social importance, be respected and take part in decision-making. Like his grandfather, Macon Dead I, (Jake), who owned an estate (Lincoln Haven), and was respected by both Whites and Blacks, Milkman wants to have a social influence. This ambition leads him from North to South, to look for gold supposed to be in a cave in Danville (Virginia). For him, this precious metal will hoist him in the upper middle-class. As such, he will no longer be infantilized by White power. Through the wealth he seeks, he wants to establish equality between Blacks and Whites so that Blacks will no longer be controlled by Whites and will not be pushed into the background of American society.

In getting Blacks' existence better, Milkman wants to establish an egalitarian society in which Blacks will not be under domination, but would have equal rights and advantages as Whites. He thinks that through economic wealth of the Black community, they can reach self-determination whereby they can contest white authority, analyze and do things according to their own vision.

IV. CONCLUSION

In her writing, Toni Morrison endeavors to gain recognition for Black identity. *In Song of Solomon*, she indicates that characters who are cut off from their history and their past appear as inauthentic, uneasy and lost. On the contrary, those who are linked to their past, their cultural and ancestral roots acquire pride and dignity. *Song of Solomon* lays a particular stress on Milkman's travel from North to the South where his initial quest for gold results in the discovery of his ancestry and cultural identity. Through his travel, Morrison shows that there is a tie between space, the past and Milkman's realization of self and his identity. In the South, he finds something more important than gold. He discovers his identity rooted in his past. In short, *Song of Solomon* is both a quest for individual and collective identity.

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